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# News Release



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## Final Recovery Plan Published for Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel

A final recovery plan has been released for the northern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus brunneus*), a species, found only in Idaho, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. The squirrel was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act on April 5, 2000.

The plan recommends establishing a minimum of 10 primary "metapopulations" (each maintaining an average effective population size of greater than 500 individuals for five consecutive years), as well as establishing associated dispersal corridors, enhancing the squirrel's preferred open-meadow habitat, and developing effective transplantation efforts to increase genetic diversity of wild populations. The plan also calls for general research, establishing a captive breeding program, and continuing field research and monitoring.

Federal protection for the northern Idaho ground squirrel may be removed when populations are self-sustaining, secure, and meet the criteria listed in the final recovery plan. The estimated cost of squirrel recovery is approximately \$304,600 per year beginning in 2003, and is estimated to total about \$2.44 million if recovery actions are successful and the species is delisted as anticipated in 2010.

"The ultimate goal of this recovery plan is to increase northern Idaho ground squirrel populations so the species can eventually be delisted. We are committed to working with others toward its recovery," said Dave Allen, Regional Director of the Service's Pacific Region.

In 1985, the total northern Idaho ground squirrel population at 18 known sites was about 5,000 squirrels. By 1998, when the species was proposed for listing under the Act, fewer than 1,000 individuals were known to exist. Spring 2002 population estimates indicated about 450 to 500 animals exist at 29 population sites.

National forest lands (Council/New Meadows Ranger Districts) host 48% of the total northern Idaho ground squirrel population. Private lands account for 41% of the population. Four percent of the squirrel population occurs on municipal property in the town of Bear, Idaho, and seven percent inhabit state-managed lands.

This squirrel has the most restricted range of any North American ground squirrel species. Its

entire range is only 20 by 61 miles. Extremely small, isolated populations exist on public and private lands in Adams and Valley counties of west-central Idaho, near Council.

The northern Idaho ground squirrel is about eight inches long and is dark brown with reddish-brown spots and a dark undercoat. It has a short, narrow tail, conspicuous ears, and tan feet. The species lives in dry, rocky meadows surrounded by ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests at elevations of about 3,000 to 5,400 feet. The squirrel is only active for a few months each year, emerging from underground hibernation in late March or early April. It remains active until late July or early August, and then returns to its winter burrow.

The ground squirrel eats mainly grass seed, and occasionally consumes roots, bulbs and flower heads. It is dependent upon grasses that grow in open meadows and shrub or grasslands that are bordered by coniferous forests. The species requires large quantities of food to store the body energy necessary for eight months of hibernation.

The primary threat to the northern Idaho ground squirrel is habitat loss and fragmentation. When coniferous forests overtake former suitable meadow habitats, or when land is converted to agriculture or developed, squirrel habitat becomes disconnected. This fragmentation results in the elimination of dispersal corridors, and confines squirrel populations into small isolated habitat areas.

The northern Idaho ground squirrel also is threatened by land use changes, fire suppression activities, recreational shooting, poisoning, genetic isolation and drift, construction and recreational development, and random natural disasters, as well as competition from the larger Columbian ground squirrel.

The Act requires the development of recovery plans for listed species unless such a plan would not promote the species' conservation. Section 4(f) of the Act requires that during recovery plan development, the Service provide an opportunity for public review and comment. Information presented during the public comment period has been considered in the preparation of the final recovery plan, and is summarized in the appendix.

Recovery plans are sometimes prepared with the assistance of recovery teams, contractors, State and Federal agencies, and other interested parties. Based on comments and new information received during the public comment and peer review period, the Service established a Technical Working Group to finalize today's recovery plan. The group included biologists from the Service, U.S. Forest Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and Albertson College of Idaho. Additional peer review was provided by academia and research individuals who are familiar with the biology and ecology of the northern Idaho ground squirrel.

Copies of the final recovery plan are available in paper or CD format at the Service's Snake River Fish and Wildlife Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Boise, Idaho 83709, (208) 378-5243. Recovery plans approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also are available online at <http://pacific.fws.gov/ecoservices/endangered/recovery/default.htm>

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.